**Twenty Questions? Twenty Tools for Better Teaching.**

Thomas R. Guskey

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Most of us can recall depressing experiences with tests from our years as students.  One of the most notable for me occurred during my sophomore year in high school. I spent hours studying for a test that was a major portion of my grade in a particular course.  I entered the classroom on the day of the test feeling confident that I was adequately prepared.  However, when the teacher handed out the test and I read through it, panic overcame me.  “Oh my gosh,” I thought, “This isn’t what I studied!”  Despite my many hours of preparation, I did poorly on the test and received a low course grade.

This experience taught me two things.  First, hard work and effort really don’t pay off in certain high school classes.  Neither my hours of preparation nor what I had learned were reflected in my test score.  Given the nature of that test, I probably could have attained a comparable score with only a fraction of the preparation time.

Second, it taught me that some high school teachers couldn’t be trusted.  Doing well in their courses wasn’t determined by how much I learned; it was determined by how well I could anticipate what they would ask on tests. The key to a high grade, therefore, was not to study what I perceived as important or even to study what was stressed in the text.  The key was to guess what that particular teacher thought was important.

From that point on, I succeeded in my classes to the degree that I was able to outguess my teachers.  I learned their game and I played it well.  Occasionally, my efforts were thwarted by teachers who took pride in their ability to outguess their students.  Their tests were “gotcha” experiences that resigned some students to failure and frustrated all.  I presumed they did this because it had been done to them - an unconscious way of passing on a hollow tradition.

Happily, such practices are rarer today.  As the quality of teaching has improved, so has the way educators prepare tests and the assessments.  Students are seldom surprised by the questions they are asked, and most judge the tests and assessments their teachers administer to be fair measures of what they have learned.  The best tests and assessments facilitate students’ learning by providing essential feedback about their learning progress, helping them identify their learning problems, and offering guidance and direction for correcting those problems (Bloom, Madaus, and Hastings 1981).

Despite these improvements, however, most high school teachers do not take advantage of assessments as tools to improve their teaching.  Teachers must view the results from their assessments in ways that help them identify what was taught well and what needs refinement or revision.

**Analyzing Assessment Results**

An easy but effective way to use tests and assessments to improve teaching is to conduct a simple analysis of each test item or criterion used to evaluate a paper, performance, or demonstration.  A tally of how many students missed each item or failed to meet a particular criterion will identify the trouble spots.  Special attention should be paid to those items or criteria missed by half or more of the students in the class.

The first thing to consider in such cases is the quality of the item or criterion itself.  In other words, the teacher must determine whether the problem rests with the assessment tool.  Perhaps the question is ambiguously worded.  Perhaps the criterion is unclear. Perhaps students misinterpreted what the teacher wanted.  Whatever the case, teachers must look carefully at those items or criteria to see whether they adequately address the knowledge, the understanding, or the skill they intended to measure.

If no obvious problems are found in the test items or assessment criteria, teachers must be willing to turn to their teaching.  If half the students in a class miss a clear and concise question about a concept that was taught, apparently that concept wasn’t taught very well. Whatever strategy was used, whatever examples were employed, or whatever explanation was offered, it simply didn’t work.  When half the students in the class answer a question incorrectly or fail to meet a particular criterion, it’s not a student‑learning problem‑it’s a teaching problem.

Analyzing test or assessment results in this way means setting aside some powerful ego issues.  Teachers’ initial response after identifying the items or the criteria missed by the majority of students is often, “Well, I taught them. They just didn’t learn it!” But on further reflection, most recognize that effectiveness in teaching is not defined by what they do as teachers.  Rather, it is defined by what their students are able to do.  If few students learn what is taught, can we really say that the teaching was effective?  Can effective teaching take place in the absence of learning?

Renowned educator Ralph W. Tyler (1949) argued that it could not.  Tyler maintained that asserting “I taught them, they just didn’t learn it” is as foolish as saying, “I sold it to them, they just didn’t buy it.” Imagine how ridiculous it would sound for a coach to say, “I taught this person how to swim. It’s not my fault if each time he jumps in the water he still sinks.”  To Tyler, the best and most defensible criterion of teaching effectiveness is student learning.  If few students learn, Tyler argued, how could anyone reasonably contend that effective teaching had occurred?

**Predicting What Works**

Many teachers are astonished to learn that they can be poor judges of what worked and what didn’t work in their teaching.  In my own teaching, I am often taken by surprise. There have been times when I thought my presentations in class were truly inspired.  My delivery was animated, my examples clear, and my insights truly incisive.  At the conclusion of the class, I regretted that I wasn’t being observed or videotaped, because it was truly one of my finest hours.  Later, when I asked a question on a test or an assessment about the ideas or concepts I introduced during that sterling presentation, few students answered correctly.  After squelching the initial impulse to blame my students, I realize that it is I who must make some changes.

Some might argue that such a perspective puts too much responsibility on teachers and not enough on the students.  Don’t students have significant responsibilities in this process?  Shouldn’t students, especially at the high school level, be expected to display initiative and personal accountability?  And besides, “If they don’t get it, that’s their fault, not mine.  I’m here to teach and they’re here to learn.”

Indeed, responsibility for learning is shared.  Even the most valiant teaching efforts cannot guarantee that all students will learn excellently.  Rarely do teachers find a test item or assessment criterion that is answered correctly by every one of their students.  There are always those students who don’t care enough or who are unwilling to put forth the effort necessary for success.  However, if a teacher is reaching less than half of the students in the class, the problem isn’t the students’. It’s the teacher’s.

**Finding Ways to Improve**

Finding ways to improve teaching once trouble spots are identified can be difficult, especially if teachers believe they have to do it alone. Fortunately, they don’t.

Every school has excellent teachers who inspire their students and teach well.  These outstanding teachers are usually more than willing to share their strategies and techniques.  But structured professional development opportunities for such reflection and collaboration are also necessary (Guskey 1998, 2000).  In addition, district level personnel are wonderful resources for ideas and practical advice.  In most cases, they are eager to provide assistance.  Collaborative partnerships with local colleges and universities offer yet another valuable resource.  Most important, using tests and assessments to help teachers improve their instructional skills cannot be restricted to a once-a-year activity based on statewide assessment results.  Instead, it must be done every time any form of classroom test or assessment is administered and scored.

If tests and assessments are used only as a means to document student achievement, the powerful benefit of teacher feedback will be missed.  Assessments can tell teachers what worked well and what didn’t.  They allow teachers to identify their strengths, recognize their weaknesses, and target efforts to improve the quality of their teaching. Classroom tests and assessments can not only enhance the effectiveness of instructional efforts, but also improve the quality of teachers’ ongoing assessment methods, which in the long run, will help significantly improve student learning.

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| **GUIDELINES FOR PRINCIPALS** |
| The following practices will help principals provide leadership that encourages teachers to use classroom assessments to improve their teaching:   1. Emphasize the use of classroom assessments as learning tools that are part of the instructional process rather than as evaluation devices used solely to document student achievement. 2. Regularly review classroom assessment results with teachers to identify potential instructional problems.  The sooner problems are identified, the sooner steps can be taken to remedy them. 3. Provide opportunities for teachers to plan collaboratively, examine their students’ assessment results and work samples to identify areas of difficulty, and develop shared strategies for improvement. 4. Review assessment results and take special note of improvements.  Recognizing success enhances morale and often stimulates motivation for further improvements. |

*References*

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